

The Effects of the WeChat Application on English as a Second Language Learners

Research Proposal

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Abstract

The English language has come to play an even more important role in communication than ever with the rapid growth of technology across the globe. Thus, as English as a Second Language (ESL) educators, it is important to provide ESL learners with strong English skills in order for them to be successful in their future endeavors. Since the introduction of Web 2.0 social technologies, educators have tried to implement these tools in an attempt to improve English language acquisition of ESL students. This study will use the WeChat application, a mobile text and voice messaging app in a quantitative research methodology study, specifically using an experimental research approach with the Solomon four-group design. The data will consist of questionnaires evaluating demographics, a pretest and a posttest. The results will look at understanding the use of Web 2.0 social technologies better, such as WeChat to meet the ever changing demands of global ESL learning.

Keywords: Web 2.0, ESL, language acquisition, technologies, learning

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Objectives and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of Web 2.0 social technologies, in particular using the WeChat application on grade 12 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' acquisition of writing skills. The objectives of this research is to identify how the use of WeChat in teaching ESL students (1) affects their English writing acquisition and (2) impacts their performance in persuasive writing.

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

A significant amount of research has been conducted on the use of Web 2.0 tools and language acquisition, specifically, writing skill acquisition. According to Wang and Vasquez's (2012) examination of 43 studies on the topic, 58% focused on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL as the target languages, with the majority of studies focusing on writing acquisition and attitudes and perceptions toward the use of Web 2.0 tools for language learning. However, Wang and Vasquez's (2012) analysis of the types of Web 2.0 tools being used revealed that only 9% of the 43 studies focused on social media, while wikis and blogs represented 23% and 35%, respectively, of Web 2.0 tools studied. Stevenson and Liu (2010) identified the ability to collaborate, create and share content via Web 2.0 useful for learning a language; this may account for the prevalence of wikis and blogs in ESL language acquisition studies using Web 2.0 tools. However, Stevenson and Liu (2010) also stated that there is a lack of research in how users use social media sites for collaboration and a lack of research on pedagogical technical usability of social media. Therefore, this study fills a gap in research by examining the use of social media and its effect on ESL learners' language and writing skill acquisition.

A quantitative approach has been underutilized in the body of research regarding Web 2.0 and ESL learners' language acquisition. Conclusions of existing studies overwhelmingly focus on ESL learners' attitudes toward the use of Web 2.0 for language acquisition and often employed a qualitative data collection approach. Mondahl and Razmerita (2014) used the results of qualitative pretests and posttests to conclude that Web 2.0 increases motivation and collaboration, which, in turn positively influences the quality of student work. Ramírez and Edgardo (2013) study of the use of collaborative Web 2.0 to improve certain aspects of writing skill also used qualitative measures, including reflective journals and focus groups, along with pretests and posttests to similarly conclude that collaborative writing increases positive attitude toward production, resulting in improved vocabulary and use of complex language forms. Wu and Hsu (2009) also used a qualitative learning attitude survey to conclude that the use of collaborative Web 2.0 tools resulted in higher reading and writing scores. Wang and Vasquez (2012) found that only 2 of the 43 studies examined used quantitative experimental designs, therefore, a gap does exist. Pretest/posttest designs are commonly used in research examining Web 2.0 tools and language acquisition. Grgurovic, Shelley, & Chapelle (2013) examined 37 studies and only included those that employed a pretest/posttest design, indicating that this approach is pervasive in the body of research.

Wang and Vasquez (2012) found that only 2 studies of the 43 examined used a random sampling approach and identify “logistical issues related to access of participants” as the major obstacle to using random sampling. The decision to choose participants from offshore British Columbia (B.C.) curriculum schools removes this obstacle. According to Cosco's (2011) report, it is “estimated that the fastest growing population of K-12 students in Canadian schools will likely come from a suburb in China”, therefore the target population is large enough to allow for

a true random sample. Additionally, the Cosco (2011) report reveals that a blended model of education (in this case, dual Canadian and Chinese high school diplomas) is only allowed at the high school level in China, and “all Canadian provincial government accredited offshore schools in China are high schools, running programs for grades 10-12 only. The blended program also essentially becomes an ESL program...”, therefore participants from offshore B.C. certified schools allow ample access to a representative random sample.

Additionally, the choice of participants also fills a gap in research. Wang and Vasquez (2012) reveal that only 4 of 43 studies examined K-12 learners. Mondahl and Razmerita (2014) suggest that “social media is popular among younger generations, so a relevant research issue is the correlation between social media and construction of knowledge”. K-12 students appear to be the most likely population to use social media, making K-12 an ideal target population to study.

The choice of WeChat as the Web 2.0 tool for this study primarily meets the requirements of a social media tool, but it is also the most popular social media app used by the target population. According to Schorr (2015) there are 498 million monthly active users on WeChat. Of those users, 47.4% are between the ages of 0-25, therefore it is reasonable to assume a significant portion of grade 12 students in China use the app.

Description of Methods

We will be using a Solomon Four-Group experimental research design. Participant clusters (see Participants section) will be randomly placed into one of four groups: two experimental groups and two control groups. A pretest (writing sample) will be given to one experimental group and one control group, but not the other two groups. Next, the two experimental groups will be given the treatment conditions of using the WeChat app for instruction and idea sharing purposes on written assignments. The two control groups will not

receive the treatment condition. After a term (September to the end of January), there will be a final posttest for all groups by way of a persuasive writing sample.

Participants

The sample in which the population will be taken from will include the 32 B.C. Certified Offshore Schools in China. The study will then use cluster random sampling in which the study will randomly select 8 out of the 32 B.C. Certified Offshore Schools, using the process of randomly assigning numbers to schools and then selecting them from a table of random numbers. The study will survey each grade 12 English class and its students in every school selected.

Instruments

The WeChat app is a mobile text and voice messaging communication app widely used in China. It provides text messaging, voice messaging, image sharing, video conferencing and locations. The experimental groups will use the group chat function to respond to weekly persuasive writing prompts, after which participants will have to respond to each other's posts and provide commentary and or feedback by either texting or audio chatting. The control group will receive the traditional method of writing instructions.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. Demographic questions will assess the gender, age, ethnic background, languages and or dialects spoken, whether English is spoken outside of school, number of years students have been learning English, and frequency of using English social media.

Pretest and Posttest. Both the pretest and posttest measurements will be in the form of participants' writing samples. Both will be a piece of persuasive writing. Writing samples will be

analyzed using a Likert-type scale of assessment, as we are interested in measuring quality of writing (see “Description of Data Sources” for details). The pretest and posttest writing prompts will not be the same, nor will they be similar in content and or about the same issue. This change in testing will be done in hopes of avoiding pretest sensitization.

Procedure. Ethics approval will be sought from the research ethics board at the University of British Columbia. Participants will be randomly selected from the B.C. Certified Offshore Schools in China. Sampling would be completed prior to the start of the first term. Research will begin the first day of Term 1 in September and run until the end of the term in late January. Our rationale for starting the research in the first term is to decrease the possibility of attrition of participants, thereby decreasing a threat to validity to posttest data (Chinese students focus on the college entrance exam called *gaokao* in term 2).

After a few days into the term, class attendance lists are settled and participating students will be asked to get a parent or guardian to sign an assent form. If they are over 18 years of age, students themselves could sign a letter of consent. All participants will complete the demographic questionnaire, and two of the four groups will then be administered the quantitative pretest. During the course of the school term, the two experimental groups will frequently use WeChat in ways described above during their English writing assignments. The quantitative posttest will be completed at the end of Term 1 in late January for all groups (see Appendix A).

Data Analyses

Results of the quantitative data analyses will be assessed for differences of written quality across the following multiple writing features: content, organization, word choice, voice, sentence structure and writing conventions. We will be comparing the data between the experimental and control groups; as well as between the two experimental groups, and between

the two control groups. We will compare and contrast each group's writing strengths and weaknesses to determine whether or not the use of WeChat may have in fact enriched and taught writing skills in a grade 12 English learning environment better than the standard traditional method. Data will be studied using descriptive statistics analysis techniques.

Description of Data Sources

In this study, data will be collected from the participating English 12 students. All our data will be quantitative; every piece of data will be given a numerical value. Data from the demographic questionnaire will be set out in a codebook that will efficiently tabulate demographic variables such as age, sex, and degrees of using English/social media. The degree of similarity among the sample groups will be an indicator to determine if our results of this study can be generalizable to B.C. Offshore Schools in China.

Needless to say, the data source from the pretest and posttest will be demanding in both marking and organization (much like high school English teachers' marking!). On each writing sample in the pretest and posttest, each writing feature (e.g., content, word choice, conventions, etc.) will be measured using a Likert-type scale. These writing features will be coded as:

- CNT - Content
- ORG - Organization
- WCH - Word Choice
- VOI - Writer's voice
- SEN - Sentence Structure
- CON - Conventions

The categories on this Likert-type scale will run from not meeting expectations (NM), minimally meeting expectations (MM), fully meeting expectations (FM) and exceeding

expectations (E). Essentially, the study will be classifying specific parts of student writing into discrete variables with numeric value. We will designate NM as a score of 1, MM as 2, FM as 3, and E as 4 (see Appendix B below). Both pretest and posttest will be administered in a handwritten format.

Potential Conclusions/Results and Educational Significance

The quantitative data will support the findings from previous studies that increased collaboration and the usage of Web 2.0 technologies improves and increases the English writing skill levels for ESL students.

Grade 12 English teachers are encouraged to plan as a team to administer the surveys and collect the results to gain a better understanding as to how the ESL students' writing skills have progressed throughout the term. As Cosco (2011) has mentioned, it is vital that the students reach the English language proficiency levels to meet their graduation or university admission requirements in order to continue their career growth. The results of this research can be used to expand more offshore school locations, as well as increasing funding and support requests for the program and technology. A better understanding of how the use Web 2.0 technologies such as WeChat affect acquisition of writing skills will inform educators in how to meet the changing demands of the global ESL learning community.

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Appendix A

Grid of the Solomon four-group Design

	Time ----->			
Experimental Group 1	R	O	T	O
Control Group 1	R	O		O
Experimental Group 2	R		T	O
Control Group 2	R			O

- R = randomly assigned
- O = Observation or measurement
- T = Treatment condition

Appendix B

Rubric of Writing Assessment

NM	MM	FM	E	WRITING ESSAY	
Points				Name:	Class:
1	2	3	4		
				CNT	
				Presents a main idea	
				Stays focused on idea	
				Includes supporting details	
				ORG	
				Clear Introduction	
				Logical conclusion	
				Makes connections and transitions	
				Follows the conventions of selected form	
				Uses a logical sequence of chronology or cause/effect	
				WCH	
				Appropriate use of words	
				Concise and clear	
				VOI	
				Demonstrates an awareness of audience	
				Demonstrates engagement with the subject	
				Demonstrates personal style	
				SEN	
				Uses variety in sentence length and structure with some transitions	
				Easy to read	
				CON	
				Correct capital letters	
				Correct end punctuation	
				Uses internal punctuation	
				Spelling	
				Follows Subject/verb agreement	
				Incorporates correct verb tense	
				Uses correct pronouns	
				Words omitted	
				Total: /	

- NM - not meeting expectations
- MM - minimally meeting expectations
- FM - fully meeting expectations
- E - exceeding expectations
- CNT - Content
- ORG - Organization
- WCH - Word Choice
- VOI - Writer's voice
- SEN - Sentence Structure
- CON - Conventions